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ABSTRACT

The U.S. Commissioner of Education concedes that his powers in many areas are merely powers of persuasion. However, he sees his role as that of needler, of constructive critic of American education at all levels and in all facets of performance. The Education Commission of the States was created to recommend basic policies and to advocate a broad framework within which excellence in education can flourish. The commissioner lists 10 State level policy, planning, and priority-getting deficiencies urgently in need of attention. ECS has done its work. Implementation is now up to the State legislatures, the governors, the chief State school officers, and the State leadership bodies in higher education. (Author/WM)

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ACCOUNTABILITY BEGINS AT THE TOP*

by

T. H. Bell
U.S. Commissioner of Education

It is a distinct pleasure to be with you and to have the privilege of addressing this distinguished audience. I recall the organizational meetings in Kansas City some years ago that brought this unique organization into being. I participated then as a chief state school officer and delegate to those meetings. To my knowledge, many of the hopes and aspirations of ECS have been realized. While much remains to be done, ECS has already established a respected position of authority on the education scene of our country. For this I express my thanks to the officers, the very able staff headed by Wendell Pierce, and to all present and past members of the Commission.

As a topic or central theme for my talk I have chosen "Accountability Begins at the Top."

I am very much concerned about my own capacity to be accountable to all of you as I assume my new duties as the 21st U.S. Commissioner of Education. The Office of Education has a leadership and service responsibility to 50 separate State school systems and to some 2,700 colleges and universities. At the same time, we must carry out the laws and legislative intent of Congress as we administer Federal programs and expend about $6.1 billion each year. "Accountability Begins at the Top" certainly begins with us in USOE.

A number of State legislatures have passed performance accountability laws in recent years. These laws are intended to fix responsibility for

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performance in education -- to encourage analysis of teacher performance-- and to point up deficiencies in the classroom. Some teachers resent these accountability laws. They view them as implying that teachers have not been performing as well as they should-- that the legislature has been compelled to pass a "shape up or ship out" law to get more efficiency.

Accountability, however, must begin at the top. In education, the chief policy making body is the State legislature. We have 50 separate State education systems with a Federal role of supplementary assistance and encouragement through Federal programs that try to correct nationwide problems and deficiencies that are usually all pervasive. We have 50 governors who recommend budgets, propose legislative action to improve education. We have 50 chief state school officers presiding over the work of the State departments of education.

As we speak about accountability on the teacher and local school unit levels, how are we doing on the State level? What educational performance measures should we apply to State legislators, governors, chief state school officers, and chancellors?

The Education Commission of the States has conducted some excellent studies. Numerous publications advocate sound policy in many areas of responsibility that fall upon your shoulders. In keeping with my thesis that accountability begins at the top, I would like to express some views concerning some areas of performance where State officials have not been doing so well. In fact, I will point out some matters calling for your attention--at least in a significant number of States.

Some serious needs have been shouting for action for 30 or 40 years. I know that this is State business, and some of you may properly say that

as the U.S. Commissioner of Education I should keep my nose in the Federal arena. But I think that I have a responsibility to express my views and to call attention to education problems on all levels--Federal, State, and local.

I quickly concede that my powers in most of the areas I will mention are merely powers of persuasion. But I want to use this opportunity to point out to you that in some States accountability laws have been passed by legislatures and signed by governors, and are being administered by State education agencies--and to attempt to persuade all of you to apply the spirit of these accountability laws.

I want to kick you on the shins and urge you to go back home and shape up a few wrongs that need your immediate attention. Please consider the following and see if you can agree with me that accountability should begin with the State legislature, the governor, and the State education agency. Here are 10 State level policy, planning, and priority-getting deficiencies that are urgently in need of your attention:

1. School district reorganization and consolidation is crying for attention in many States. Some States have more than a thousand school districts Many are permitting small, inefficient school districts to operate in close proximity to other small districts. This needs legislative attention. I don't know how any legislative body can afford to continue to ignore this problem. It is a problem that has been with us for too long. Until we shape up our basic administrative units--get rid of some overburden--some States will continue to be limited in the progress they can make.

2. We have a problem in higher education because of legislative propensity to advance the status of junior colleges. (It's a bit like the Peter Principle of getting promoted to your highest level of incompetence.) Many community colleges are moving up in status (but not in meeting the most urgent needs) by becoming 4-year degree granting institutions. Many State colleges play the status escalation game by becoming universities. In many cases this is not in keeping with genuine educational need but pure political expediency. Many States lack sound State level planning and direction in higher education. On a performance accountability score card, a number of States would have to receive low marks in this area.

3. Role definitions for the State education system and articulation of education with job needs and economic changes are sadly needed in a number of States. Education is found muddling along at times while the State's economic needs and demands shift in new directions. Priority-setting and effective State level coordination need more attention in a number of States. Responsiveness and adaptability cannot be attained if higher education, vocational education, and secondary education are not effectively controlled and coordinated at the State level. Some States have as many as three or four separate agencies, all independently setting priorities and responding to different perceptions of statewide needs. The entire planning and role definition problem needs attention in many States.

4. Three million handicapped children need adequate education. This means that many States are neglecting an area of responsibility of critical importance. Some groups are now going to the courts to compel action on behalf of handicapped children. On any score card on educational

performance in the States, this area surely must be considered. State policy should respond to these needs without court action.

5. The great city school systems of our country have some special needs. Some are administrative monstrosities-- too large and unwieldy. Some are centers of both racial and economic isolation. Some lack adequate financing. What is your State doing for this most urgent problem? Are zoning laws and control of urban sprawl planned with education needs in mind? The States must come to grips with this big, challenging, frightening problem. Federal assistance is needed but, as far as education is concerned, it is a State responsibility.

6. ECS has been conducting a major effort to assess educational accomplishment through the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The States need to take more initiatives in assessment. Much more State level information on student accomplishment is needed.

7. Many States are operating more State colleges and universities than are needed or can be justified. This commits a State to mediocrity in its entire higher education effort. It draws off dollars that could build centers of excellence. Many States permit duplication and overlap in expensive graduate studies as a further dissipation of resources.

8. Collective bargaining in education is fast becoming a fact of life in many States. Some States have excellent laws to regulate this process. But a significant number have left this to grow up without a framework of law to curb excesses. Some very long, inexcusably long, school shutdowns have occurred because of poor State supervision and assistance.

9. Some States have unique problems in education--problems related to culture, economy, geographic location. I am referring to bilingual education problems--to problems of migrants, immigrants, or a heavy population of Native Americans. Special provisions must be made for these unique situations.

10. The tenth and final performance factor is likely the most important: Those responsible for State education policy must provide reasonable equity in financing schools. School finance equalization programs in many States are grossly inadequate. We all know that the local property tax revenue available per student from one school district to another often represents inequity. But we have known this for years. In these times, when we are attempting to provide equality of educational opportunity, we can't justify revenue in one district that is two or three times greater than that in another district in the same State.

In any rank order list of measures of excellence, this matter of equalization in State finance formulas has to be first.

I am sure that most of us would like to look into many more than these 10 measures that I have discussed. It will take more than this somewhat superficial listing to lead your State to excellence in education. But you need to begin with these 10 measures, for they are fundamental-- the keys to the door to excellence.

The Education Commission of the States was created to recommend basic policies and to advocate a broad framework within which excellence in education can flourish. From time to time, ECS publications have

advocated many of the points I have made. But the implementation is up to the State legislatures, the governors, the chief state school officers, and the State leadership bodies in higher education.

ECS has done its work, and done it well, on most of those items. What is needed is State action --- and most of it must be taken by the legislature.

Education is primarily a State responsibility, with significant support coming from both local and Federal levels. If accountability in education begins at the top, it begins with most of us here this evening. It certainly starts with the legislature in each and every one of our 50 States.

It is easy to be a critic. Perhaps I have played that role too strongly as I have tried to point up some fundamental shortcomings in our State education system. Criticism, if it is useful, must be constructive. I hope this criticism will serve a constructive purpose. My purpose is to lend my voice to what ECS has been advocating and to press for a sense of urgency in closing some obvious gaps between what is and what ought to be in education.

I want to turn now to a discussion about leadership, effective management, and the assumption of direct and affirmative responsibility for performance results in our schools and colleges. Some new demands are being made of us as educational leaders. I want to talk briefly of these demands and our behavior as leaders.

It is easy to generalize about educational leadership: <u>We need more aggressive, responsive, dynamic, "gutsy" leadership</u> today because the problems are more complex, the demands and expectations are much, much greater, and the pressures are intense--very intense. It is more difficult

to particularize such a general, platitudinous statement, so I will indulge in some more generalities before I take on the risky task of suggesting to this sophisticated audience some specific steps that should be taken to get this aggressive, responsive, gutsy leadership:

1. It is trite but true to say that our schools and colleges can be no better than the leadership that all of us in responsible positions can offer.

2. It is also trite but true to remind ourselves that leadership implies momentum and direction. If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there.

3. Leadership in education these days calls for a high level of social intelligence, great skill in involving others, and unusual ability and style in directing the work of others in what is known as participatory management. Some leaders in education are having a hard time mastering these new demands of our time and era. Neither the authoritarian who insists on calling all the signals nor the easy Joe who shares and involves till he gives away his power and influence can make it as a leader in today's world. We need in an education leader a delicately balanced approach that involves many in deliberations but keeps the power and authority for decision making in the leader's own hands.

Having made these general observations about leadership in education, I will turn now to some specifics about leadership practices and priorities:

As I see it, the first requisite of leadership and management effectiveness is to identify the needs, set the priorities, and establish a clear sense of direction. We often see education muddling too much for

lack of decisive leadership. There comes a time when a leader must say explicitly what will be accomplished and when.

Every key person in a school district or at a college should know what the objectives and performance priorities are before each academic year begins. Each key person should know what the performance score was for the previous year--should know what needs were not met--and should share in organizational hopes, aspirations, and performance commitments.

Speaking in the sports vernacular, we must keep score and report what the score is. This must be done regularly and systematically. Have you ever played a game in which the participants just played without keeping track of the score? Have you noticed the change in intensity when the score is kept and reported regularly?

Education is not sufficiently performance conscious. Because it is hard to measure performance we have almost abandoned the task. This neglect has resulted in passage of a rash of so-called accountability laws in many States. Legislative bodies are asking for some concrete results.

The first task facing any education leader is to see that someone tabs up the performance score of the institution. We have a fancy term for this in education. We call it <u>needs assessment</u>. What this means in simple language is the gathering and analyzing of the performance facts to find out what the gaps are between what is and what ought to be.

How many students are below grade level in reading and math? Can we change that next year by planning new efforts now? What are the facts

about attendance, dropouts, etc? How many research projects were started and completed last year? Do faculty members' teaching loads need correction next year? Is plant utilization defensible from a cost benefit viewpoint? What are the performance trends of the school district or college?

It is as simple as this:

When performance is measured, performance improves. When performance is measured and the results are reported back, the rate of improvement accelerates.

I should say parenthetically that the person who most irks me is the one with overly simple answers to very complex problems. I am well aware that I may be guilty of over simplification in my contention that we can improve performance in education simply by measuring it and reporting the results. But this first step of profiling the performance of the schools and colleges under our management responsibility is being neglected. I know there are notable exceptions, but this neglect is widespread.

The effective, dynamic, and responsive leadership that we must have can in no way be accomplished if we don't have some score keepers to tell us about performance. Educational management will not become responsive--it will not become self renewing and problem solving -- until it becomes more results oriented!

Education leaders need management information. This information must be current and relevant. It must focus upon student performance and outcomes. Show me a school system or university without a results-oriented management information system, and I will show you an educational organization that is muddling--that lacks direction-- that is indecisive and loose in its standards of performance.

The second specific demand of education leadership today is to set performance priorities based on this performance consciousness that I have been talking about. Each year the chief executive officer of a school system or university should put out annual performance priority statements. Such statements should call attention to the gaps that exist, to the trends and directions that must be changed if the organization is to improve, renew itself, and be more effective than it was the year before.

In the spirit of involvement and participatory management, the chief executive should seek staff assistance from all levels of his or her organization, both in assessing needs and in stating performance priorities. The chief should approach this with a genuine and totally sincere request for advice, input, and response.

Many successful executives (1) ask for input, (2) put out tentative priorities based on the input, (3) ask for feedback, criticism of the tentative priorities, and (4) finally put out the final performance priorities for the next academic year. These are the first steps, as many of you know, in the management system known as MBO.

By measuring performance and reporting it, by setting annually the performance priorities of the institution, the executive is carrying out his leadership responsibility by pointing out the direction of his institution in real and finite performance terms. Contrast this, if you will, to the education organization whose chief fails to measure, behaves in a manner that lets almost everyone know that he or she is not a results-oriented leader, and seldom if ever expresses the goals and objectives of his or her institution or organization.

A dynamic and charismatic leader measures performance, reports the results, and sets priorities on a regular basis. In education these things should occur at least once every academic year.

The third requisite of leadership in education is to seek performance commitments from each school in a school system or from each department of a college. As I see it, a superintendent or college president is entitled to know what the specific performance plans and operational objectives are for each unit under his or her direction. If each school or department is keeping score, looking at performance, and studying the performance priorities put out each year by the chief executive officer, it should not be too difficult to set annual objectives-- to make some finite performance commitments for the coming academic year. If the chief executive asks for annual performance objectives from each unit in the organization, he or she will get some accountability and will achieve some results oriented management in all the units of the organization.

This will be particularly so if the chief holds a monthly management review conference with each unit head-- constantly talks about performance and seeks performance information. Leadership implies stewardship, and it is good practice to give a regular accounting of one's stewardship. It will help to attain what the football coaches call intensity.

These are, of course, just a few of the performance criteria of a leadership committed to results-oriented management.

I have called attention today to problems of setting sound State policy, of putting each State's educational house in order. I have emphasized a few fundamental principles of leadership effectiveness and management competence.

During my tenure as Commissioner I hope to be a needler --- to be a constructive critic of American education at all levels and in all facets of performance. Much more attention must be given to educational leadership --- to how well we meet our problems and how quickly we solve them.

We need to look at our leadership deficiencies, for in that lies the key to progress.

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